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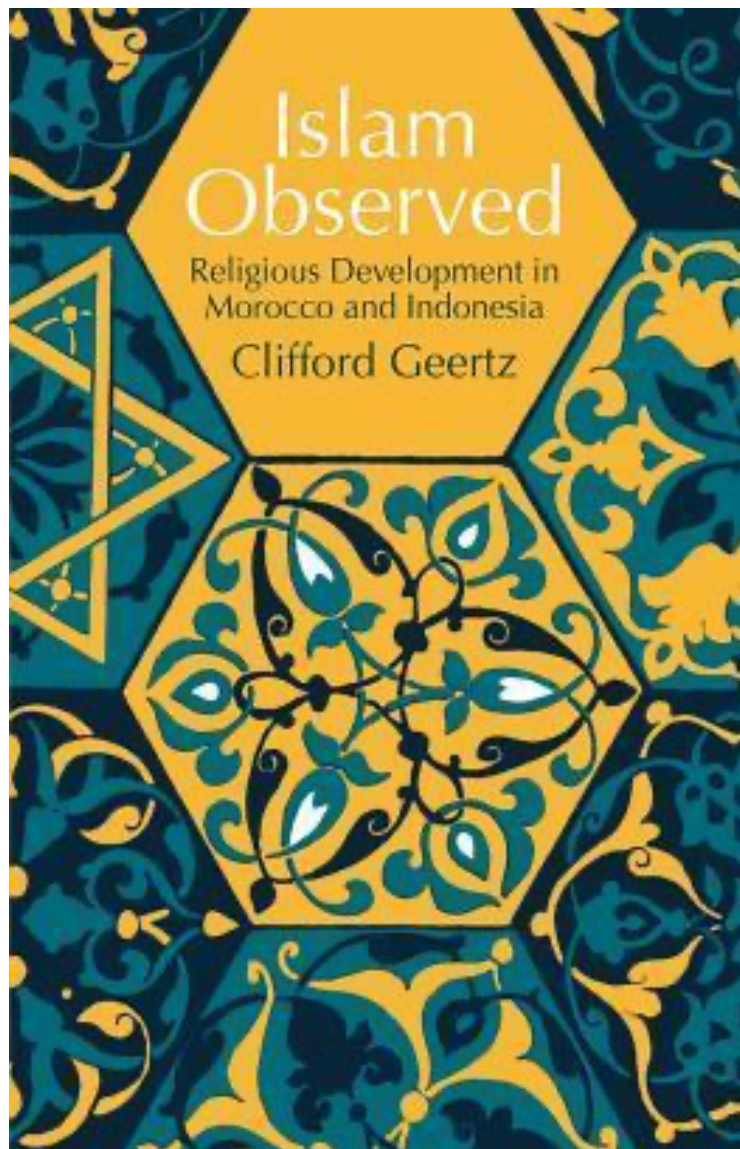
**National Forum: Anthropology of Religions and the Study of Algerian
Society Culture**

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**Title: reading the book: Islam and Culture A Comparative Analysis of Islamic
Cultural Expressions in Morocco and Indonesia Clifford Geertz**



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Overview of what Clifford Geertz wanted in his book

"In four brief chapters," writes Clifford Geertz in his preface, "I have attempted both to lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, the Indonesian and the Moroccan."

Introduction

Clifford Geertz's *"Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia"* (1968) presents a comparative study of Islam as practiced in two culturally distinct societies: Morocco and Indonesia. Geertz's work is pioneering in the field of anthropology for its exploration of how the same religion can manifest differently based on historical, cultural, and social contexts. This essay aims to analyze the main arguments presented in Geertz's book, focusing on the varying expressions of Islamic culture in Morocco and Indonesia, and the factors contributing to these differences. By examining the religious, historical, and cultural contexts that Geertz outlines, this essay will provide a comprehensive understanding of how Islam, as a global religion, adapts and evolves according to local cultures.

1. Geertz's Theoretical Framework

Geertz's anthropological approach to studying Islam is grounded in symbolic anthropology, which emphasizes understanding cultures through the symbols and meanings they create. In *"Islam Observed,"* Geertz argues that Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, while rooted in the same fundamental beliefs and practices, has developed unique characteristics shaped by each society's historical experiences, political structures, and cultural values.

1.1 Symbolic Anthropology and Islam

Symbolic anthropology focuses on the interpretation of symbols and rituals that are central to a culture's identity. Geertz applies this approach to Islam, suggesting that religious practices and beliefs are not merely doctrinal but are also deeply embedded in the cultural and historical

contexts of each society. He views religion as a cultural system, where symbols and rituals serve as a means of communication and expression of social and personal identities.

1.2 The Concept of "Cultural System"

Geertz introduces the concept of a "cultural system" to explain how Islam functions in different societies. A cultural system, according to Geertz, consists of a set of symbols and meanings that guide individuals' actions and beliefs. In the context of Islam, the cultural system involves interpreting the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic law (Sharia) within the framework of local customs, traditions, and social norms. This framework helps explain why Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, despite being the same religion, appears so different in practice and expression.

2. Historical Contexts of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia

The historical development of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia plays a crucial role in shaping its current forms and practices in these regions. Geertz highlights the different historical trajectories that Islam followed in Morocco and Indonesia, which have led to distinct religious expressions.

2.1 Islam in Morocco

Islam was introduced to Morocco in the 7th century through Arab conquests. The religion quickly intertwined with local Berber customs and traditions, leading to a unique blend of Arab and Berber Islamic practices. The establishment of powerful Islamic dynasties, such as the Almoravids and Almohads, reinforced Islamic law and doctrine, shaping a strong, centralized Islamic identity that emphasized orthodoxy and the authority of the religious scholars (ulama).

2.2 Islam in Indonesia

In contrast, Islam arrived in Indonesia in the 13th century through trade and was gradually adopted by local rulers and communities. The Indonesian archipelago, with its diverse ethnic groups and traditions, facilitated the blending of Islam with local customs, resulting in a more syncretic form of Islam. Geertz notes that Indonesian Islam is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, allowing for the coexistence of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices with Islamic teachings.

3. Cultural Differences and Islamic Expression

Geertz explores the cultural differences between Morocco and Indonesia, which significantly influence how Islam is practiced and understood in these societies.

3.1 Moroccan Islamic Culture

In Morocco, Islam is deeply intertwined with the concept of political authority and social order. The Moroccan understanding of Islam emphasizes strict adherence to religious law and doctrine, with a strong focus on the authority of the ulama and the sultan as both a political and religious leader. Moroccan Islamic culture is characterized by its emphasis on order, discipline, and the maintenance of social hierarchy.

3.2 Indonesian Islamic Culture

Indonesian Islamic culture, on the other hand, is more syncretic and tolerant of diversity. Geertz describes Indonesian Islam as being more focused on the spiritual and mystical aspects of the religion, often incorporating elements of Sufism and local traditions. This syncretic nature is reflected in the widespread acceptance of cultural practices such as Javanese shadow puppetry (wayang kulit) and the celebration of local saints (wali). Indonesian Islam is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, emphasizing personal piety and spiritual experience over strict adherence to religious law.

4. Social Structures and Religious Practices

The social structures in Morocco and Indonesia also play a significant role in shaping the practice of Islam in these societies.

4.1 Social Hierarchies in Morocco

Moroccan society is structured around a strong sense of hierarchy and authority, which is reflected in its Islamic practices. The ulama in Morocco hold significant power and influence, serving as the primary interpreters of Islamic law and doctrine. Religious practices in Morocco are often public and communal, emphasizing collective worship and the reinforcement of social order. The mosque serves as a central institution for both religious and social life, reinforcing the connection between religion and state.

4.2 Community and Diversity in Indonesia

In contrast, Indonesian society is more decentralized and diverse, with a greater emphasis on community and local autonomy. Islamic practices in Indonesia are often more individualistic and private, focusing on personal spiritual development rather than communal worship. The diversity of Indonesia's ethnic and cultural groups allows for a wide range of religious practices and interpretations, leading to a more pluralistic and inclusive form of Islam.

5. The Role of Sufism in Shaping Local Islamic Practices

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, has played a significant role in shaping the practice of Islam in both Morocco and Indonesia. However, its influence has manifested differently in each context.

5.1 Sufism in Morocco

In Morocco, Sufism has traditionally been associated with the ruling elite and has been used to reinforce political authority and social order. Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) in Morocco often have strong ties to the state and play a key role in maintaining social cohesion and religious orthodoxy. Sufi practices in Morocco emphasize discipline, ritual purity, and adherence to Islamic law, reflecting the broader cultural emphasis on order and authority.

5.2 Sufism in Indonesia

In Indonesia, Sufism has been more associated with popular religious practices and has played a key role in the spread of Islam throughout the archipelago. Sufi teachings and practices in Indonesia often incorporate local beliefs and customs, reflecting the syncretic nature of Indonesian Islam. Sufi rituals, such as dhikr (remembrance of God) and mawlid (celebration

of the Prophet's birthday), are widely practiced and are often seen as expressions of personal piety and spiritual devotion.

6. Geertz's Conclusion: Islam as a Cultural System

Geertz concludes that Islam, as observed in Morocco and Indonesia, cannot be understood purely as a set of universal doctrines and practices. Instead, Islam is a cultural system that is deeply embedded in the historical, social, and cultural contexts of each society. The differences in Islamic expression between Morocco and Indonesia illustrate the adaptability and diversity of Islam as a religion, as well as the importance of understanding the local contexts in which it is practiced.

6.1 Implications for the Study of Islam

Geertz's comparative study of Morocco and Indonesia has significant implications for the study of Islam. It challenges the notion of a monolithic Islam and highlights the importance of considering the cultural and historical contexts in which Islam is practiced. Geertz's work also emphasizes the need for an anthropological approach to studying Islam, one that takes into account the symbolic and cultural dimensions of religious practice.

6.2 Broader Impact on Anthropology

Beyond its contribution to Islamic studies, Geertz's work has had a profound impact on the field of anthropology. His emphasis on culture as a system of symbols and meanings has influenced subsequent generations of anthropologists and has contributed to the development of symbolic anthropology as a subfield. Geertz's approach to studying religion has also influenced the study of other religions, encouraging anthropologists to consider the cultural and social dimensions of religious practice.

Conclusion

Clifford Geertz's *"Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia"* provides a rich and nuanced analysis of how Islam is practiced and understood in two culturally distinct societies. By comparing the Islamic expressions in Morocco and Indonesia, Geertz demonstrates the adaptability and diversity of Islam as a religion and the importance of considering the cultural and historical contexts in which it is practiced. Geertz's work challenges the notion of a monolithic Islam and highlights the need for an anthropological approach to studying religion that takes into account the symbolic and cultural dimensions of religious practice. Through his comparative study, Geertz provides valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of Islam and contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion, culture, and society.

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